

Condensed History of the Companion Synod Relationship between Northwest Synod of Wisconsin and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi

The relationship began in 1991 when the then senior pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi (ELCM), Joseph P. Bvumbwe, came to America to study for a masters degree in theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. He completed the degree in 1992 and returned to Malawi with his family. In 1995 he was elected Bishop of the ELCM.

While in America, Pastor Bvumbwe came in contact with congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in Colorado, Wisconsin, and Indiana. Contact with churches in Michigan City, Indiana proved to be significant because Pastor Bvumbwe met Kathy Oelschlager at an event for Lutheran educators. She encouraged her husband, Pastor Harold Oelschlager, to invite Joseph and Maria Bvumbwe to visit their church in Indiana, which they did. A lifelong friendship was born. Upon retirement, Pastor Harold and Kathy moved to Eau Claire, WI and joined Immanuel Lutheran Church. Immanuel had established a foundation and had tithe money to spend, and following a rich experience sponsoring Missionary Barb Cornwell (Solsaa) was looking for a more permanent relationship with a church in a "majority world" country. In 1996 Harold and Kathy were planning a visit to the ELCM. They were asked if Immanuel could pay for part of their trip in exchange for Immanuel being able to call them their "missionaries." They were commissioned and spent three months in Malawi. Pastor Harold said that being commissioned changed the way they looked at the purpose of their trip. The Oelschlagers, upon returning to the U.S. made many presentations to synod congregations and reported their observations of the ELCM to Rev. Robert Berg, the new bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin and to the synod church council.

Bishop Berg and the church council decided to invite Bishop Bvumbwe to speak at the 1997 synod assembly and to devote the assembly offering for construction of a chapel somewhere in the ELCM. In 1998, Bishop Berg and the synod church council applied to the ELCM Division of Global Missions for a second companion synod, namely, the ELCM. In 1999, after sending Rev. Benyam Kassahun, ELCA director of eastern African companion synod relationships, to assess the ELCM, the application was granted.

The companion relationship was furthered in 2000 when the Rev. James Magelssen, assistant bishop for the Northwest Synod, headed a delegation of eight (Rev. James and Sharon Magelssen, Rev. Harold and Kathy Oelschlager, Rev. Andrew and Carolyn Oppedahl, Diane Kaufmann, and Kathy Shattuck) to the ELCM. Three chapels built by the Northwest Synod were dedicated during the trip, two of them due to the 1997 synod assembly offering; the third chapel, Sadzi Congregation in Zomba Parish, was funded by Immanuel Lutheran Church, Eau Claire.

Also of great significance is the role played by Wapogasset Bible Camp, Amery, Wisconsin. In 2001, Bishop Bvumbwe was invited to spend the first year of his sabbatical in America to be part of the Wapogasset Bible Camp staff to develop a Malawi Village Experience. At the same time, the bible camp released Bishop Bvumbwe to preach in the congregations of the synod.

On February 16, 2002, Bishop Berg and Bishop Bvumbwe led the first work/seminar to guide congregations in the companion relationship process, with the result that 23 congregations applied to be a part of a companion congregation/parish relationship with the ELCM. Many synod congregations and parishes in Malawi have been matched since then. Bishop Robert Berg's first official synod visit to Malawi occurred in August, 2004, and all subsequent Bishops have made official visits. In 2002 Diane Kaufmann became the first Companion Coordinator and position has been supported by every bishop since, becoming a synod staff appointment. Subsequent coordinators have been Pr. Ramie Bakken, Pr. John Sutherland, and Deacon Laura Ramlow.

In 2006, the synod was able to host the Cathedral Choir from Lilongwe. They performed 15 concerts throughout the synod and created a lot of interest in the relationship. Many other visits to and from Malawi have occurred since then. The development of a Pastor's Academy for mutual learning occurred in 2009 as part of the Book of Faith Initiative and purchases of the Lutheran Study Bible by the synod's Lay School of Ministry for every pastor in Malawi. In 2010 the role of teach pastors was initiated with Pastors Todd Iverson and Greg Kaufmann serving as the first teachers. Young people from Malawi have also served as summer counselors and education young campers attending Luther Park and Luther Point about the country and church.

As was pointed out in the June 26, 2002 minutes at a ZIP (Zomba Immanuel Partners) meeting at Immanuel Lutheran Church,

We need to be careful not to let our agenda get in the way of forming relationships or to turn our relationships with our companions into a one-way, dependency kind of relationship. We want to go to Malawi to celebrate and share God's gifts.

Thanks be to God for the strength and mutual encouragement of the Companion Synod relationship between the NW Synod of Wisconsin and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi.

September 14, 2023

-Diane Kaufmann